

A hand holding a glowing lightbulb, symbolizing an idea or innovation. The background is a gradient of blue and yellow, with a network of white dots and lines overlaid, suggesting a digital or technological theme.

HSTalks

## **Guiding Students on Assignments and Projects: Drill Down or Funnel Out?**

Whether to take the wide lens or a sharp focus on a research assignment confronts every student in their learning journey. Too narrow a topic can make the project esoteric and inaccessible. Too broad and the work risks becoming anodyne. Multiple frameworks have been proposed by academics to help students identify a meaningful and realistic research problem.

One of these, [the Pico framework](#), originally developed for use in health and clinical research, breaks down a problem into chunks that together create a manageable research question.

<b>P</b>	Population / Patient / Problem	What population or patient group are the investigators working with? It can also refer to the problem being investigated
<b>I</b>	Intervention	What intervention is the intervention group receiving?
<b>C</b>	Comparison / Control	Is there a control group, and if so, what intervention is the control group receiving?
<b>O</b>	Outcome	What outcomes are being measured and how?

The Pico framework can also help formulate a social science or arts question. For example, applying it to the business context: **P** – what place of work (industry or company) does the research cover? **I** – what intervention (an external change in the competitive market, for example, or an organisational change) is being examined? **C** – what is the comparison (how did this external or internal change affect another company or industry)? And **O** – what was the outcome?

Designed to facilitate the structure of an essay rather than to identify a research problem, the [Creating a Research Space \(CARS\) Framework](#) also hints at ways to approach a research problem. Under this structure, developed by [John Swales and Christine Peak](#) in 1990, students make three rhetorical moves in their writing, in order to ‘establish the territory,’ ‘establish the niche,’ and then ‘occupy the niche’.

Under this framework, the writer begins by identifying the overall context or challenge of their research problem (the territory), before explaining why their research addresses or resolves the problem (the niche). Finally the paper should describe the outcomes or solutions that will follow from this work (occupying the niche). While this model was developed to help students plan

and present social science research, the “context-action-result” format is of course the classic structure of real-world [business case studies](#). These are foundational to teaching management courses at most business schools, as exemplified by the [Harvard Business School Case Method](#).

It may be a truism to suggest that the nature of a source tells you a great deal about what you can learn from it, before even considering the content. In many ways, it’s ‘obvious’: if your source for a history essay is a [period drama film](#), then much of what you discover will not be true or reliable. But you will learn a great deal about cultural assumptions at the time of its production, as well as popular understanding of that period in history, and [contemporary judgments of the characters](#) and events. These are valuable points of reference.

It’s worth acknowledging that a film made several hundred years after the events it depicts adds perspective—although, for example in the case of *Gone with the Wind*, only when the student has access to materials that shed light on those events from other directions, such as contemporary writers, [archived documents](#), or [scholarly books](#) and articles about the period.

A professor and department chair at Georgia State University, Stephanie Evans, requires that her students include at least [ten different source types](#) (not sources!) in their final dissertation. The list of required types ranges from social media to government records, to published articles. Amending the well-known phrase, she notes, “I believe that if you give students a source, they’ll read for a day, but if you teach them how to find sources, they’ll read forever.”

By requiring students to include such a diverse mix of sources, Professor Evans enables her students to both drill down into a more granular view of the topic, and to funnel out in their understanding of the subject.

In business education, students can explore diverse perspectives through sources such as [personal memoirs](#), [financial records](#), [academic articles](#) and case studies, expert analyses of an industry, opinion pieces, [interviews](#), and a myriad of other possibilities. While a company’s annual report, [press releases](#), or CEO speeches portray a snapshot of its fortunes at an observable time, multiple dimensions can be added by a scholarly history of that company, an article about competing firms in the industry, or insights from the media about the wider political and social environment.

The collapse of a company, for example, may be both a story about hubris, and a reflection of long-term changes in the economy. When Carillion, the UK construction firm and a major government supplier, [collapsed in 2018](#), it was presented in the media as a story of overambition and dishonesty. Taking the long view, other realities [emerged to experts](#), and the inherent risks in the company’s financial structure proved to be the key to [Carillion’s dramatic collapse](#). In the



case of Carillion, like other corporate failures, students obtain a richer understanding by pursuing both the individual choices and the global context which led to the collapse.

For educators who seek enriching resources in business and management courses, which both broaden and sharpen the understanding of students, Henry Stewart Talks offers a multimedia collection of lectures, case studies, key-concept series, interviews, and peer-reviewed, practitioner-led vocational articles: [The Business & Management Collection](#).

Together, the specially commissioned, multimedia talks and journal articles present an ideal destination for initial assignment research; all content is prepared by experts and is accessible to undergraduates and MBA participants. Subscribers to the collection include universities and business schools around the world.



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Editors and lecturers are leading world experts and practitioners drawn from academia, research institutes, commerce, industry, the professions and government. The collections are continuously expanded and updated and may be easily embedded in online learning environments such as Moodle and Blackboard.

## References

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